

# **Research Paper about The Role of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Peacebuilding through Protection from Gender-Based Violence (GBV)**

## **Literature Review:**

### **1. Context of the Issues:**

The latest studies on gender and peacebuilding have recognized an intersection between gender-based violence protection programs implemented by civil society organization and peacebuilding. Peacebuilding initiatives have proven to be successful in addressing the underlying causes of conflict and promoting sustainable peace. Gender-based violence is both a cause and a consequence of conflict, disrupting social cohesion and undermining peacebuilding processes. This social phenomenon necessitates the intervention of effective GBV protection strategies for the purpose of ensuring gender equality and fostering a safe and inclusive society. Civil society organizations also play a pivotal role in addressing the intersection between GBV protection programs and peacebuilding by advocating for survivor rights, implementing prevention programs, and fostering community resilience.

The conflict has turned Syrian into a site for deeply disrupted societal structures, intensifying vulnerabilities, particularly among women and girls, and expanding incidents of gender-based violence. With the escalation of the conflict, civil society organizations (CSOs) emerged as active actors in addressing the humanitarian and social implications, including GBV, and contributed to broader peacebuilding efforts.

Peacebuilding encompasses efforts to create sustainable peace by addressing the root causes of conflict, supporting reconciliation, and rebuilding social cohesion. In conflict settings like Syria, GBV grows into a pervasive issue, used as a weapon of war and as an indicator of broader structural violence against marginalized groups. The literature highlights the cyclical relationship between GBV and conflict, emphasizing that effective peacebuilding must integrate gender-transformative mechanisms to prevent and address GBV to ensure equitable and inclusive recovery.

CSOs have been recognized as central agents in peacebuilding, especially in contexts where state mechanisms are weak or absent as is the case in Syrian society. They act as intermediaries between communities and international actors, leveraging local knowledge and trust to implement context-specific interventions. Studies on CSO engagement in Syria point to the organizations' roles in providing immediate humanitarian relief and psychosocial support for GBV survivors, advocating for policy reforms and accountability measures to prevent GBV, and facilitating community dialogues to challenge harmful gender norms that perpetuate violence. However, CSOs face significant challenges, including limited resources, security risks, and political constraints, which impact their ability to operate effectively.

## **2. Theoretical Framework:**

The theoretical framework draws on conflict transformation theory and gender theory to explore the intersection of peacebuilding, GBV prevention programs and the role of civil society organizations (CSOs). Gender theory argues that gender roles are social constructs, shaped by cultural, historical, and ideological forces that vary across time and space. Conflict transformation theory focuses on addressing the root causes of conflict and creating conditions for lasting peace by transforming relationships, structures, and attitudes. It recognizes GBV as both a cause and consequence of conflict and societal tensions, and advocates for strategies and approaches to address this social issue. These theories provide a lens to understand the strategies and approaches employed by CSOs to address GBV as part of broader peacebuilding efforts in Syria. The two theories provide a framework to understand how the strategies and approaches implemented by Syrian CSOs are addressing gender-based violence, reshaping gender norms in Syrian society, and contributing to peacebuilding processes.

## **3. Identifying the Research Gap:**

Although the literature on peacebuilding has grown in popularity and gender-based violence has gained further recognition as a critical issue in conflict-affected settings, there is limited research that concretely examines the role of civil society organizations in addressing GBV within the broader framework of peacebuilding in Syria.

Existing studies on gender and peacebuilding often focus on the impact of conflict on GBV or the contributions of CSOs to peacebuilding, yet few of them explore the intersection of these two critical phenomena.

Moreover, while international actors' efforts to address GBV are well-documented, the unique contributions, challenges, and strategies employed by local Syrian CSOs remain under-researched. This gap is particularly weighty given the central role of these organizations in providing frontline support to survivors, promoting gender equality, and fostering social cohesion in the midst of ongoing conflict. Understanding the intersection between peacebuilding, GBV prevention programs and the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) is fundamental for developing context-specific, effective interventions that integrate GBV prevention and response into peacebuilding efforts, making this research both timely and necessary.

### **Research aims and questions:**

#### **The research aims to:**

- Explore the extent to which strategies and approaches deployed by Syrian CSOs addressing GBV contribute to peacebuilding initiatives
- Identify the barriers faced by Syrian CSOs in integrating GBV response into peacebuilding initiatives in Syria

#### **1. The research questions:**

- a. What are the GBV dynamics in Syrian context? How the conflict has impacted the traditional gender roles?

- b. What strategies do Syrian CSOs employ to address GBV during conflict? How do these strategies inform peacebuilding initiatives?
- c. What are the barriers that confront CSOs in integrating GBV response into peacebuilding initiatives within Syria?
- d. What are the roles of women in peacebuilding through CSOs?

## 2. Methodology:

- **Ontology:** The research rejects and deviates from masculine Cartesian ontologies that project a view of reality that operates based on dualism. Reality is not a being in and of itself in which individuals cannot shape or influence; it is rather fluid, changeable, and dynamic. In light of this, the research follows a constructivism epistemological stance where reality is ever-changing and evolving; that is, the social world is in the process of being constantly shaped, reshaped, and molded. People hailing from diverse backgrounds understand reality based on their own subjective experiences, interpretations, perceptions, and emotions. People- far from being bound by essentialist terms and positions- are active agents who engage in the construction, understanding, and interpretation of various social phenomena. Moreover, people's realities and experiences are shaped by specific historical and cultural contexts, and change in different circumstances.
- **Epistemology:** The research draws on **critical realist epistemology**. This theory of epistemology exists independently of our perceptions, but nevertheless presents a complex and dynamic analysis of reality. Individuals are social constructions that are shaped by specific historical and cultural discourses. Nonetheless, these discourses are not stable or fixed, but can be changed and redefined. The theory argues that the data collected by researchers does not capture all that is real or actual at that moment; there are underlying structural mechanism (religious, social, political, ideological, economic etc..) that interact in complex ways to generate the social phenomenon. By deploying scientific methods and proper analysis, researchers can develop an understanding of the causes of these mechanisms, and can thus challenge them to generate better outcomes in the social world. This theory of knowledge allows the examination of the underlying mechanisms that shape the role of Syrian CSOs in addressing gender-based violence within peacebuilding efforts in Syria.
- **Research Approach:** The research employs a **qualitative interpretive approach** to capture in-depth insights into the strategies, approaches and barriers faced by Syrian CSO members addressing GBV and contributing to peacebuilding in a conflict-affected setting. This approach provides a deeper understanding of complex social phenomena, like GBV and peacebuilding, and highlights the interconnected role of CSOs.

**Methods:** Data has been collected through 5 FGD with CSOs community members who deploying GBV prevention and peacebuilding initiatives and one FGD with local CSOs members form the 5 governorates.

**Sample:** The research deploys a **purposive sampling**. The research seeks to explore the strategies and approaches deployed by Syrian CSOs in addressing GBV during conflict, and additionally explores barriers that these CSOs encounter whilst integrating GBV prevention programs into peacebuilding initiatives. For this purpose, the research purposively sought out leaders, staff members, and stakeholders from Syrian CSOs.

**Data Analysis Approach:** An **inductive approach to data analysis** will be deployed and will involve thematic analysis to uncover patterns, themes, and insights into the strategies and approaches employed by Syrian CSOs to address GBV and contribute to peacebuilding. The analysis will also explore the barriers these organizations face in implementing GBV prevention programs. This analysis method will also aid in exploring the relationship between Syrian CSOs, GBV prevention programs, and peacebuilding.

#### **Ethical conduct:**

- Upon contacting the potential participants, researchers explained the purpose of the research and the use of the collected information.
- Participants were also given the opportunity to ask questions and share their thoughts on issues that were not discussed during the FGDs. Respondents were interviewed only after providing their voluntary and informed verbal consent to participate in the assessment. In the case of interviews conducted with adolescents, a verbal informed consent from their caregivers was also required.
- Researchers are a committed to ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of participants at all times, and thus participants' names were not included in the transcript of the FGD's.

#### **Findings:**

##### **a. GBV Dynamics in Syrian Context**

- Increased awareness of SGBV issues:

Gender-based violence spreads in the Syrian context in various forms and at varying levels. The findings indicate that the increase is linked to heightened awareness among people, as they have come to recognize that what they experience falls under what is referred to as gender-based violence. Despite challenges like child marriage and harassment, communities have started discussing gender-based violence more openly. Awareness campaigns and drama productions have significantly increased awareness, though reaching all target groups remains difficult.

On the other hand, participants from Homs noted a gap in society's understanding and awareness regarding gender-based violence. They also pointed out a lack of alignment with the Syrian context to make the issue comprehensible for all. Furthermore, economic challenges were emphasized, with participants stressing the importance of empowering women to facilitate discussions about such violence.

- SGBV violence in relation to men and women:

Participants from Damascus explained that women in Syria are more exposed to gender-based violence than men, particularly physical violence, with its causes deeply rooted in societal norms. Some responses opposed addressing this topic, arguing it is exaggerated, with claims that some women use it as an excuse. Discussions around gender roles were said to alienate people as they conflict with customs and traditions.

In Aleppo, responses highlighted that violence is not exclusive to women but also affects men, who are deprived of continuing their education to join the labor market early. Similarly, girls are married off young, compelled to work, and take on new roles at a young age, which impacts their development. Responses from Tartus indicated that after the war, cases of gender-based violence increased significantly, with prominent examples including women being denied inheritance and rising incidents of violence due to polygamy. Some participants highlighted the dramatic shift in gender roles, particularly for young men who are absent for extended periods due to compulsory military service in the regular army, leaving young women to assume new roles within the family. This shift exposes women to various forms of gender-based violence. On the other hand, female fighters have also contributed to reshaping social roles. The war has both unveiled pre-existing violence and exacerbated it, especially in rural areas where traditions and customs prevail.

A civil society activist shed light on another important but often overlooked context of gender-based violence: the violence faced by peacebuilders and civil activists within their workplaces such as the sexual exploitation and Abuse SEA.

**b. GBV strategies of CSOs and peacebuilding initiatives:**

**GBV strategies of SCOs:**

Respondents across various governorates reported the implementation of a wide range of activities by civil society organizations, which employed strategies aimed at raising awareness, peer education, and referrals to available services. These activities included workshops and awareness sessions on gender-based violence and online harassment, as well as legal sessions to inform women about their rights and discuss how to defend themselves and claim their rights in cases of violence. Additionally, legal consultations were provided. The "16 Days of Activism" campaign played a significant role in spreading awareness across diverse social segments, helping to build trust with communities and raising awareness about issues related to Gender based violence.



In Aleppo, participants highlighted efforts to enhance understanding of the root causes of violence. However, these interventions face several challenges. For example, in Damascus, participants noted that recently the sessions addressed GBV topic, such as physical differences between males and females, which is a **sensitive subject for the communities**. This underlines the need for cautious and context-sensitive approaches to such discussions.

In Homs, respondents pointed out flawed strategies in implementing some programs that were **not adapted to the local context**. For example, addressing early marriage focused on its negatives for those already married at a young age rather than emphasizing its prevention for future generations. Awareness sessions were also exclusively targeted women without involving men. In Tartous, participants noted the age gap between workers and beneficiaries. However, this challenge was overcome by emphasizing interactive methods where beneficiaries themselves contributed information, reinforcing youth awareness of their role and responsibility in addressing these issues while ensuring the accuracy of the information shared. In Tartous, participants noted the age gap between workers and beneficiaries. However, this challenge was overcome by emphasizing interactive methods where beneficiaries themselves contributed information, reinforcing youth awareness of their role and responsibility in addressing these issues while ensuring the accuracy of the information shared.

Participants emphasized the importance of revising strategies, such as addressing the unequal distribution of personal necessities between men and women. Conversely, they highlighted the value of programs that support social cohesion as part of broader efforts to address these issues.

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#### **Interrelation between peacebuilding initiative and GBV strategies:**

There is a theoretical intersection between violence and peacebuilding, as highlighted by civil society activists, but this often does not reflect into practical implementation. Most projects address violence and peacebuilding separately, which weakens their overall impact. Overall results showed that the CSOs implemented gender-based violence strategies aimed to prevent communities from GBV through awareness campaign and providing services by referrals which means they only enhancing the daily life conditions of women and girls without working on the root causes.

Regarding a civil society activist, she affirms that there are programs that have transformed roles and can be included within the framework of peacebuilding programs, positively reflecting on society. However, today, not many women are capable of expressing themselves, which makes them distant from the community. Therefore, efforts must focus on strengthening the role of civil society and empowering it with concepts and roles. This requires raising awareness at the environmental level, which contributes to the design and implementation of gender-based violence protection programs and aligning them with peacebuilding initiatives.

Some participants from the community members believe that the concept of peacebuilding is broad and inherently includes gender-based violence, indicating a mutual relationship between the two. Thus, there is a need to clarify and organize these terms while working on both simultaneously to achieve tangible results.

Many organizations launch projects aimed at protecting women from violence or peacebuilding initiatives, but their efforts are often separated due to the influence of donors' agendas, which rarely integrate violence-related issues with peacebuilding efforts. Local actors have attempts on bridging the two aspects (peacebuilding and SGBV). For example, In Homs, an example was shared of women leaders working to break stereotypes and promote protection, contributing to peacebuilding by creating common grounds and supporting social cohesion. They also formed networks with activists, enabling them to reach different areas through key individuals.

The peacebuilding field has its own challenges of having no clear understanding for peacebuilding or social cohesion programs. Local organizations focus mainly on capacity building and basic development, such as the Family Planning Association, which aims to train its staff. Financial constraints and internal conflicts among community workers further hinder efforts to achieve social cohesion.

The speaker believes that the role of women in peacebuilding has been pivotal, as reflected in the saying "women make peace, men make war," highlighting the difference in roles between the genders. Women have been the ones making decisions related to peace, while men have contributed to making wars. In community work, women have played a fundamental role as community leaders, enabling them to enter and work within communities.

Participants point out that women's work has been more impactful and successful in community and civil gatherings, such as the advisory council, which included women from various backgrounds and geographies. Despite their differing viewpoints, they agreed on a single perspective. This council was more successful than the constitutional committee or civil chambers that include both men and women. According to the participants, women are the ones who make peace, and during crises, they have set an example by working towards peace with strong belief. They believe that if women's roles are strengthened in a more systematic way, the results will be rewarding.

### **c. CSOs barriers in the integration of GBV response into peacebuilding initiatives within Syria:**

The overall situation showed several barriers in the five governates, including:

- Difficulties in reaching people to participate in awareness activities and in connecting them with the services they need.
- A lack of alignment between programs and the Syrian context, which has led to a failure to address the community's specific needs. A civil society activist shared her personal experience, saying, "I personally faced danger and couldn't protect myself. In one situation, I spoke out, and as a result, a campaign was launched calling for my head. I was talking about social issues, but I was threatened with death. Today, we work cautiously to protect our families and close circles, but we remain at risk and are limited to certain roles."

- The way the concept is presented and promoted affects how it is accepted. The terms are unknown to some, while others downplay its importance. This creates a stigma for those working in this field and puts them at risk. Sensitive topics must be addressed carefully, and men should be included to gain wider community support.
- Survivors' main concerns are their families' economic and social situations, which leads them to ignore needs like GBV case management.
- High transportation costs, which are often unaffordable, prevent them from accessing services.
- Lack of fund and the difficulties to provide the essential service particularly the livelihood aspect which facilitate the economic empowerment of the women.
- The responses from Damascus highlighted the importance of analyzing the context carefully, as some people who reject the concept see it from within their own circle. There is social resistance to topics such as sexual education, especially from men, with the role of women in decision-making being ignored.
- In Hama, there was mention of a lack of networking or partnerships between actors. Additionally, the monopolization of tools and skilled individuals by institutions and organizations hinders the spread of knowledge. There is also a lack of protection policies in many local and official entities, which affects the overall situation.
- In Damascus, there are activities that require approvals, and there is fear associated with them, especially when discussing the concept of peacebuilding. Even licensed organizations have reservations and fear legal accountability. Additionally, linking discussions of gender-based violence with homosexuality threatens any activity due to the significant social sensitivity surrounding the topic.
- There are doubts surrounding international organizations, as they are seen as ideologically driven with external agendas. In particular, discussions about peace have become unwelcome following the events in Gaza. Some believe that these organizations are focused on money laundering, leading to negative attitudes and concerns about legal accountability.
- A major challenge is related to the seriousness of those participating in activities. Some people confirm that their motivation is to receive financial compensation to cover basic or secondary needs.
- Organizations in Tartous suffer from isolation from global networks, which impedes the effective transfer of knowledge in peacebuilding. There is a clear gap between charitable and developmental generations, as the community views peacebuilding as simple capacity development efforts, without recognizing its true dimensions. The lack of office skills among staff exacerbates challenges, as many see working in this field as a source of income.

**d. Gender transformative approach within peacebuilding initiatives:**

Based on the collected data, the term "gender transformative" is a new concept for many. If introduced to civil society, it could enhance their roles in meaningful ways. So, after the



concept has been defined, the participants provided the answers however there is not transformative programs in Syria they know about.

According to the participants, the key obstacles include resistance to women's roles and the doubt about integrating concepts like gender transformative approaches and peacebuilding.

Civil society, however, has the capacity to address both immediate needs and peacebuilding, provided the terminology and concepts are aligned with community needs. Bridging the gap between theoretical frameworks and practical demands is crucial to fostering acceptance and implementing effective change.

Although, the activist of the social civic organization emphasized that the importance of addressing various levels in the family, community, and society directly and through an integrated approach to achieve peacebuilding. It highlights that while peacebuilding is vital, it must intersect with the immediate concerns of people, particularly economic challenges. Methodologies combining relief, development, and peacebuilding are key priorities in the gender transformative approach.

The gender transformative approach should leverage existing opportunities, such as equality in employment and education, while ensuring alignment with local community needs. Open dialogues between civil society and other stakeholders are essential for designing programs that address these intersections. The current situation demands moving beyond traditional peacebuilding to adopt a holistic approach that integrates the three levels effectively which is the practical implementation of the gender transformative approach that leads to building the peace.